



David S. Broder

The President's Shield

TWO PLANELOADS of thoroughly frustrated people flew back from Los Angeles to Washington last week. On one plane was Sen. George McGovern and his campaign staff; on the other, the press corps covering President Nixon.

The two groups are different in makeup and motive but they share a common frustration. Neither one has figured out how to penetrate the tough plastic shield that's been thrown up around the Republican candidate for President.

McGovern is unhappy because he's been unable to engage his opponent in di-

rect debate on the issues. The press is unhappy because it doesn't have much of a campaign to cover, and worried that it's being manipulated into one-sided coverage.

As one who made the California swing with McGovern and then retraced the route with Mr. Nixon, it's my impression that few reporters are bleeding for the Democratic nominee. There's less personal partisanship in the press for either of the 1972 candidates than I've seen in any of the previous presidential campaigns I've covered.

But there is a growing worry that the rules of the game on the two campaigns are so dissimilar that the press is not doing the even-handed, probing kind of job the public has a right to expect at election time.

THE DISTANCE between George McGovern and the reporters covering him is about ten steps on the chartered 727 jet, and the trail is walked several times each day by the candidate making a point to reporters or reporters seeking his response to their questions. Little is secret and nothing sacred on the McGovern plane.

But there is a wall a mile high between Mr. Nixon and the press. Mr. Nixon travels in isolation—in his private compartment on Air Force One, in his helicopter or his limousine.

His major speeches on the trip—to Republican fund-raising dinners—were watched by reporters from separate rooms, via closed-circuit television. In Los Angeles, it took personal intercession by a White House press aide for a few reporters to gain access to the banquet hall—the same room in the same hotel where reporters had freely interviewed guests at a McGovern fund-raiser the night before.

The only sound television cameras in the room when Mr. Nixon spoke were the closed-circuit cameras controlled by the White House itself. The scenes of the dinner you saw on television—and that most of the reporters saw—were exactly what the White House wanted you to see, and nothing more.

Under these circumstances, the press functions more as a propaganda tool for the President than as an independent reporting group. The difference between a journalist and a propagandist is that a journalist can make his own observations and ask his own questions.

On the Nixon campaign, unlike the McGovern campaign, there is no candidate to question, and, really, no one authorized to speak for him.

I know of no precedent for this. Between Labor Day and election day of 1956, President Eisenhower held five news conferences. In the same period of 1964, the last

time an incumbent was involved in a presidential contest, Lyndon B. Johnson had five press conferences and innumerable informal sessions with reporters aboard his plane.

By contrast, Mr. Nixon has held one press conference in the month since his renomination, and his press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, says there is "a 50-50 chance" he'll have another before election day.

Unlike 1968, when all the Nixon advisers were available daily to reporters covering his campaign (as McGovern aides are now), there was not a single policy or political staff member from the White House, the Republican National Committee or the Committee for the Re-election of the President aboard the Nixon press plane. When Ziegler mingled with reporters en route back to Washington, he specified at the beginning of the conversation that any political discussion would be off-the-record.

In every way possible, then, the Nixon entourage seems to be systematically stifling the kind of dialogue that has in the past been thought to be the heart of a presidential campaign.

THAT IS the source of McGovern's unhappiness, but it's a problem the press must address — directly, even at the risk of being thought partisan.

The press was accused — and I think, rightly — of being derelict in 1968 in not pressing Mr. Nixon to expound his strategy for ending the Vietnam war.

How does the press justify itself this year, if the man who is likely to remain President is allowed to go through the whole campaign without answering questions on his plans for taxes, for wage-price controls, for future policy in Vietnam and a dozen other topics?

An election is supposed to be the time a politician — even a President — submits himself to the jury of the American voters. As a lawyer, Richard Nixon knows that if he were as high-handed with a jury as he's being in this campaign, he'd risk being cited for contempt of court.

The press of the country ought to be calling Mr. Nixon on this — not for George McGovern's sake but for the sake of its own tattered reputation and for the public which it presumes to serve.

The editors of the country and the television news chiefs ought to tell Mr. Nixon in plain terms, that before they spend another nickel to send their reporters and camera crews around the country with him, they want a system set up in which journalists can be journalists again, and a President campaigns as a candidate, not a touring emperor.